

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF MISSOURI
EASTERN DIVISION**

SHANE SITTON,

Plaintiff,

v.

MECC, et al.,

Defendants.

)
)
)
)
)
)
)
)
)
)

No. 4:21-cv-00859-NCC

OPINION, MEMORANDUM AND ORDER

This matter comes before the Court on the motion of plaintiff Shane Sitton for leave to commence this civil action without prepayment of the required filing fee.¹ Based on the financial information provided by plaintiff, the motion will be granted, and the Court will assess an initial partial filing fee of \$1.00. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1). Additionally, for the reasons discussed below, the Court will dismiss plaintiff's complaint without prejudice.

28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1)

Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1), a prisoner bringing a civil action in forma pauperis is required to pay the full amount of the filing fee. If the prisoner has insufficient funds in his or her prison account to pay the entire fee, the Court must assess and, when funds exist, collect an initial partial filing fee of 20 percent of the greater of (1) the average monthly deposits in the prisoner's account, or (2) the average monthly balance in the prisoner's account for the prior six-month period. After payment of the initial partial filing fee, the prisoner is required to make monthly payments of 20 percent of the preceding month's income credited to the prisoner's account. 28

¹ Plaintiff has not submitted a separate motion for leave to proceed in forma pauperis, nor has he paid the filing fee. However, in the body of his complaint, plaintiff states: "Application to proceed in District Court without prepaying fees or cost[s] [because I] only get \$8.50 [a] month [and] can[']t get account statement." The Court has construed this as a motion for leave to commence this civil action without prepayment of the required filing fee.

U.S.C. § 1915(b)(2). The agency having custody of the prisoner will forward these monthly payments to the Clerk of Court each time the amount in the prisoner's account exceeds \$10.00, until the filing fee is fully paid. *Id.*

Plaintiff has not submitted a prison account statement as required by 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(2), stating that he has been unable to get a copy. Nevertheless, having reviewed the information provided by plaintiff, the Court will require him to pay an initial partial filing fee of \$1.00. *See Henderson v. Norris*, 129 F.3d 481, 484 (8th Cir. 1997) (explaining that when a prisoner is unable to provide the court with a copy of his prison account statement, the court should assess an amount “that is reasonable, based on whatever information the court has about the prisoner’s finances”). If plaintiff is unable to pay the initial partial filing fee, he must submit a copy of his prison account statement in support of his claim.

Legal Standard on Initial Review

Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2), the Court is required to dismiss a complaint filed in forma pauperis if it is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted. To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must demonstrate a plausible claim for relief, which is more than a “mere possibility of misconduct.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 679 (2009). “A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Id.* at 678. Determining whether a complaint states a plausible claim for relief is a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw upon judicial experience and common sense. *Id.* at 679. The court must “accept as true the facts alleged, but not legal conclusions or threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements.” *Barton v. Taber*, 820 F.3d 958, 964 (8th Cir. 2016). *See also Brown v. Green Tree Servicing LLC*, 820 F.3d 371, 372-73

(8th Cir. 2016) (stating that court must accept factual allegations in complaint as true, but is not required to “accept as true any legal conclusion couched as a factual allegation”).

When reviewing a pro se complaint under § 1915(e)(2), the Court must give it the benefit of a liberal construction. *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972). A “liberal construction” means that if the essence of an allegation is discernible, the district court should construe the plaintiff’s complaint in a way that permits his or her claim to be considered within the proper legal framework. *Solomon v. Petray*, 795 F.3d 777, 787 (8th Cir. 2015). However, even pro se complaints are required to allege facts which, if true, state a claim for relief as a matter of law. *Martin v. Aubuchon*, 623 F.2d 1282, 1286 (8th Cir. 1980). *See also Stone v. Harry*, 364 F.3d 912, 914-15 (8th Cir. 2004) (stating that federal courts are not required to “assume facts that are not alleged, just because an additional factual allegation would have formed a stronger complaint”). In addition, affording a pro se complaint the benefit of a liberal construction does not mean that procedural rules in ordinary civil litigation must be interpreted so as to excuse mistakes by those who proceed without counsel. *See McNeil v. United States*, 508 U.S. 106, 113 (1993).

The Complaint

Plaintiff is a self-represented litigant who is currently incarcerated at the Northeast Correctional Center in Bowling Green, Missouri.² He brings this civil action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983, naming the Missouri Eastern Correctional Center (MECC) and the Missouri Department of Corrections (MODOC) as defendants. The complaint is handwritten and not on a Court-provided form.

² The Court notes that plaintiff’s complaint appears to have been written by Joseph Michael Devon Engel, a fellow inmate who has filed over 160 cases in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri. The complaint arrived in an envelope with Mr. Engel’s name and inmate identification number provided as the return address. Furthermore, the handwritten complaint is similar in terms of structure, style, and phrasing to those submitted by Mr. Engel himself. Plaintiff, however, appears to have appended his signature at the bottom.

In the “Statement of Claim,” plaintiff asserts that he is in protective custody, but that he has been placed in a cell “with people that [are] not PC.” (Docket No. 1 at 1). He alleges that this will get him – or someone else – seriously hurt. According to plaintiff, defendants “get away with this [because] of the new rule book,” but that it is “not good.” He contends that administrative segregation inmates should only be housed with other administrative segregation inmates, and that protective custody inmates should only be housed with other protective custody inmates.

Plaintiff does not allege that anything has happened to him as a result of being housed with non-protective custody inmates. Nonetheless, he broadly asserts injuries to his “civil rights, prisoner rights, mental health, [and] physical health.” Plaintiff also alleges that he has been subjected to “mind raping.” As a consequence, he seeks \$350 million in damages.

Discussion

Plaintiff is a self-represented litigant who brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983, alleging that the MECC and MODOC violated his constitutional rights by housing him in protective custody with inmates who did not have protective custody status. Because plaintiff is proceeding in forma pauperis, the Court has reviewed his complaint under 28 U.S.C. § 1915. Based on that review, and for the three reasons discussed below, this action must be dismissed without prejudice.

A. The State is Not a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 “Person”

Plaintiff’s claims against the MECC and MODOC must be dismissed because the State of Missouri is not a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 “person.” “Section 1983 provides for an action against a ‘person’ for a violation, under color of law, of another’s civil rights.” *McLean v. Gordon*, 548 F.3d 613, 618 (8th Cir. 2008). *See also Deretich v. Office of Admin. Hearings*, 798 F.2d 1147, 1154 (8th Cir. 1986) (stating that “[§] 1983 provides a cause of action against persons only”). However,

“neither a State nor its officials acting in their official capacity are ‘persons’ under § 1983.” *Will v. Michigan Dep’t of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 71 (1989). *See also Calzone v. Hawley*, 866 F.3d 866, 872 (8th Cir. 2017) (asserting that a “State is not a person under § 1983”); and *Kruger v. Nebraska*, 820 F.3d 295, 301 (8th Cir. 2016) (explaining that “a state is not a person for purposes of a claim for money damages under § 1983”).

In this case, as previously noted, plaintiff has sued both the MECC, which is a state prison, and MODOC, which is a department of the State of Missouri. Both these claims are treated as being made against the state itself. However, in a claim for money damages – which is what plaintiff is seeking – a state is not a “person.” Because plaintiff is missing an element of a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 claim, his claims against the MECC and MODOC must be dismissed.

B. Sovereign Immunity Bars Plaintiff’s Claims

“Sovereign immunity is the privilege of the sovereign not to be sued without its consent.” *Va. Office for Prot. & Advocacy v. Stewart*, 563 U.S. 247, 253 (2011). The Eleventh Amendment has been held to confer sovereign immunity on an un-consenting state from lawsuits brought in federal court by a state’s own citizens or the citizens of another state. *Edelman v. Jordan*, 415 U.S. 651, 662-63 (1974). *See also Webb v. City of Maplewood*, 889 F.3d 483, 485 (8th Cir. 2018) (“The Eleventh Amendment protects States and their arms and instrumentalities from suit in federal court”); *Dover Elevator Co. v. Ark. State Univ.*, 64 F.3d 442, 446 (8th Cir. 1995) (“The Eleventh Amendment bars private parties from suing a state in federal court”); and *Egerdahl v. Hibbing Cmty. Coll.*, 72 F.3d 615, 618-19 (8th Cir. 1995) (“Generally, in the absence of consent a suit in which the State or one of its agencies or departments is named as the defendant is proscribed by the Eleventh Amendment”). The Eleventh Amendment bars suit against a state or its agencies for any kind of relief, not merely monetary damages. *Monroe v. Arkansas State Univ.*, 495 F.3d 591,

594 (8th Cir. 2007) (stating that district court erred in allowing plaintiff to proceed against state university for injunctive relief, and remanding matter to district court for dismissal).

There are two “well-established exceptions” to the sovereign immunity provided by the Eleventh Amendment. *Barnes v. State of Missouri*, 960 F.2d 63, 64 (8th Cir. 1992). “The first exception to Eleventh Amendment immunity is where Congress has statutorily abrogated such immunity by clear and unmistakable language.” *Id.* The second exception is when a state waives its immunity to suit in federal court. *Id.* at 65. A state will be found to have waived its immunity “only where stated by the most express language or by such overwhelming implications from the text as will leave no room for any other reasonable construction.” *Welch v. Tex. Dep’t of Highways & Pub. Transp.*, 483 U.S. 468, 473 (1987). Neither exception is applicable in this case.

The first exception is inapplicable, because the Supreme Court has determined that 42 U.S.C. § 1983 – under which this case arises – does not revoke a state’s Eleventh Amendment immunity from suit in federal court. *See Will*, 491 U.S. at 66 (“We cannot conclude that § 1983 was intended to disregard the well-established immunity of a State from being sued without its consent”); and *Quern v. Jordan*, 440 U.S. 332, 341 (1979) (“[W]e simply are unwilling to believe...that Congress intended by the general language of § 1983 to override the traditional sovereign immunity of the States”). The second exception is also inapplicable, because the State of Missouri has not waived its sovereign immunity in this type of case. *See RSMo § 537.600* (explaining that sovereign immunity is in effect, and providing exceptions).

Here, plaintiff has named the MECC and MODOC as the only two defendants. As noted above, however, the Eleventh Amendment bars suit against a state or its agencies for both monetary and injunctive relief. Furthermore, no exceptions to sovereign immunity are present in

this case. Therefore, for this reason as well, plaintiff's claims against the MECC and MODOC must be dismissed.

C. Failure to State a Claim

"To state a claim under section 1983, a plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the Constitution and laws of the United States." *Wong v. Minnesota Dep't of Human Servs.*, 820 F.3d 922, 934 (8th Cir. 2016). Specifically, "a plaintiff must allege sufficient facts to show (1) that the defendant(s) acted under color of state law, and (2) that the alleged wrongful conduct deprived the plaintiff of a constitutionally protected federal right." *Zutz v. Nelson*, 601 F.3d 842, 848 (8th Cir. 2010). A plaintiff bringing a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action must include in his complaint "either direct or inferential allegations respecting all the material elements necessary to sustain a recovery under some viable legal theory." *Brooks v. Roy*, 776 F.3d 957, 960 (8th Cir. 2015).

In this case, as noted above, neither the MECC nor MODOC constitute a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 "person." Furthermore, even if defendants were persons for purposes of the statute, plaintiff has not adequately alleged the violation of a constitutional right. While he broadly asserts that defendants placed non-protective custody inmates in protective custody housing, there are no facts indicating that this living situation amounted to an unconstitutional condition of confinement. That is, plaintiff has not alleged that a specific person presented a risk to him, that defendants knew of this risk, and that defendants disregarded the risk. Without any factual support, plaintiff's assertion amounts to a conclusion, which the Court is not required to accept as true. *See Hamilton v. Palm*, 621 F.3d 816, 817-18 (8th Cir. 2010) (explaining that to state a cause of action, "[a] pleading that merely pleads labels and conclusions, or a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action, or naked assertions devoid of factual enhancement will not suffice"). Therefore, plaintiff's claims against defendants must be dismissed for failure to state a claim.

Accordingly,

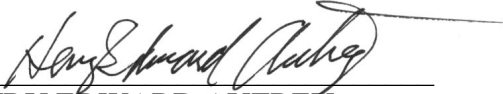
IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that plaintiff's motion for leave to proceed in forma pauperis is **GRANTED**.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that plaintiff must pay an initial partial filing fee of \$1.00 within twenty-one (21) days of the date of this order. Plaintiff is instructed to make his remittance payable to "Clerk, United States District Court," and to include upon it: (1) his name; (2) his prison registration number; (3) the case number; and (4) the statement that the remittance is for an original proceeding.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that this action is **DISMISSED** without prejudice. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B). A separate order of dismissal will be entered herewith.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that an appeal from this order of dismissal would not be taken in good faith.

Dated this 15th day of November, 2021.


HENRY EDWARD AUTREY
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE